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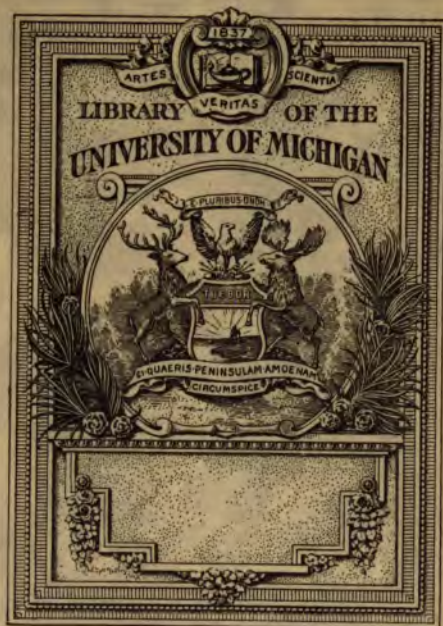
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RATIONAL LIBRARY WORK  
WITH CHILDREN AND THE  
PREPARATION FOR IT . . .

BY

FRANCES JENKINS OLCOTT

*Head of Children's Department, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh*



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## RATIONAL LIBRARY WORK WITH CHILDREN AND THE PREPARATION FOR IT

By FRANCES JENKINS OLCOTT, *Head of Children's Department, Carnegie Library of  
Pittsburgh*

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the influence of good reading on children, but rather to outline a practical organization for the distribution of books among children. As a premise it is assumed that the public library is already an acknowledged educational factor, its chief duty being the distribution of good reading to the masses, and that in order to secure generally an intelligent use of the library by adults, it is necessary to begin by educating the children. This last does not mean, however, that we should organize our work with children at the expense of adult work. To do so would be to defeat the object for which library work with children exists. Instead, we should set aside a suitable portion of the library fund to provide books, special quarters, and attendants for the children, the amount of this fund to be decided by the needs of the library. Naturally, a library specializing in reference work, or having any other important specialty, would not spend the larger share of its fund on the children's room; while, on the other hand, a library in a tenement district, where two-thirds or more of its patrons were children, would spend its funds accordingly. Rational library work with children must adjust itself to the *needs of the library as a whole*, and be based on a study of the social conditions of the people who will use the library. Nationality, religion, occupations, and living conditions should be considered, books selected, and methods adjusted according to actual needs. This requires, on the part of the children's librarian, a wide knowledge of books and some experience in working with different

classes of people. It is most convenient for me to illustrate an organization based on social conditions by describing the work with children of our own library, that is, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. First, let me draw your attention to the fact that our work with children is only one of the activities of the library, and is not carried on at the expense of other departments.

The organization has been made to *meet the needs of Pittsburgh* and of *no other city*. Conditions in Pittsburgh are as follows: Within an area that might reasonably be included in her limits there is a population of about one million. Within her present limits the census records show a population of 321,616 persons, more than two-thirds of whom are either foreign born, or children of foreign born parents, and persons of negro descent. The negroes alone number more than 17,000, which is 5.3 per cent. of the whole recorded population. Perhaps the most surprising facts relate to professions and industries. There are more than 90,000 mechanics, skilled workmen, day laborers, servants, etc.; 34,000 persons engaged in trade and transportation; as against 6,000 *professional men and women*.

Pittsburgh is a city of contrasts, built on many hills, and divided by three rivers. The hillsides and perpendicular bluffs along the rivers are dotted with wooden shanties, while many families live in "jo-boats" moored to river banks. From the very back doors of many fine residences in the East End and from near beautiful parks there stretch, hidden by the hills, long runs and gullies that are filled with shanties, while in

the down-town districts are networks of alleys and courts, lined with unsanitary brick buildings and tumble down rear tenements, crowded with foreigners. Wages, as a rule, are excellent; work is easily procured, and it is not poverty only, but chiefly ignorance which is to blame for the present shiftless conditions. Jacob Riis recently made a tour of our tenement district, and in a public meeting said that he had never seen tenement conditions as bad as those in Pittsburgh.

The physical topography of Pittsburgh makes it especially difficult and expensive for us to reach all parts of the city. Often a high bluff or a deep ravine cuts a neighborhood in two, making necessary two deposits of books in the same district instead of one.

With such conditions to meet, we have organized our work for children as follows: A children's department was installed in 1898, which has developed gradually until during the past year there were 152 places in the city where children could draw books. The object of this department is to place good literature into the hands of every child in the city, and especially to carry the influence of good books into the homes of children of few opportunities and no advantages. When it is understood that there are more than 59,000 children enrolled in our public, private, and parochial schools, besides large numbers of children employed in factories or elsewhere, and that our collection of juvenile books numbers only 48,000 volumes, it will be seen what a huge task we have before us.

In order to accomplish our object of distributing books, the department is organized under the supervision of a chief of department into the following divisions: Administrative division, division of children's rooms, division of work with schools, division of work with home libraries and reading clubs. Each division has its own peculiar field of work. The administrative division is the unifying factor in the department. Through it the work with children is welded into a systematized organization. By it,

children's books are examined, read, and selected, distributing agencies organized, collections kept up to date, assistants trained and placed, methods studied and introduced, material compiled for the use of the department—in fact, its aim is to help in every way possible the development of the whole work.

Next to the Administrative division comes the division of children's rooms, of which, strictly speaking, we have at present seven. Each room offers a distinctly different phase of cosmopolitan life, and is in charge of one or more trained children's librarians.

The ideal children's room has a double function. First, it is the place in which the children are being prepared to use the adult library, and we feel that if our rooms fail to develop intelligent, self-helpful readers, we have failed in our main object. Second, the ideal children's room should *take the place of a child's private library*, and it should, as far as possible, give the child a chance to browse among books of all classes and kinds, in a room beautifully proportioned and decorated, and presided over by a genial and sympathetic woman who has a genuine interest in the personalities and preferences of the boys and girls. The gracious influence of this room should differ widely from that of the school-room, with its rigid law and order, and it should not partake too much of "paternalism." All methods used should be in keeping with the dignity of the library building. It is most important that the technical side of the work of the room, such as the loan system, the cataloging and classification, should not differ essentially from the same work in the adult department, so that the children will not have to unlearn things when they leave the children's room. Technical methods may be simplified, but not changed, and above all, the closest relation should exist between the adult and juvenile departments. We desire also that all methods used to draw the children to the library building should be those which lead them to the best books.

It is impossible in so short a space to

discuss the problems of book selection or the determinate methods used to draw attention to books, such as story hours, reading circles, and picture bulletins. It is our endeavor in the children's rooms to use only those methods which are dignified, direct, and informal, and which lead to better reading. The main object of our story hour and reading circles *is to draw attention to books and to books only.*

Whereas we try to preserve the informal atmosphere of our children's rooms, keeping out the school-room atmosphere, we are at the same time doing work with the schools. Our branch librarians and the children's librarians visit the schools of their districts, keep in touch with the teachers, lend them books, and encourage them to send the children to the library to look up subjects for school compositions. In order not to interfere with the atmosphere of pleasure reading, which we like to preserve in our children's rooms, we set aside a corner or a room for school use.

Besides the school work done directly from our children's rooms, we have, as already stated, a division of work with schools. This division is in charge of a regular supervisor and assistant, who spend their time visiting the schools, where they talk with the teachers, read aloud and tell stories in the class-rooms, and make arrangements to send collections of books to the schools to be used for home circulation and in the class-room. We have at present 15,000 school duplicates and cannot supply the demand.

The aims of this division are: that no child shall leave the city schools without having had the opportunity to read good books; that no child shall pass the last grade in the ward schools without having had instruction in the use of catalogs, indexes, etc., and that teachers in the class rooms shall be aided in every way possible with material to illustrate their lessons.

We cannot emphasize too much the enthusiasm with which principals and teachers have met the offers of the library to supply them with books and story-tellers. A num-

ber of schools set aside regular class periods for story-telling and reading aloud, and we are gaining noticeable results from this work. Besides direct work with the schools, this division carries on a number of deposit stations, and coöperates with the branch children's rooms in the establishment of summer playground libraries.

Although we are reaching thousands of children through our children's rooms and through the city schools, there still remain large numbers of children who do not use our children's rooms and who do not go to school. These children work at home, in toby shops, in factories, or they sell papers. There are also "gangs" of restless boys who hang about street corners and whose lawless mischief leads them into crime. For the purpose of reaching these children and young people, we have organized a division of work with home libraries and reading clubs, which penetrates into alleys, "runs," and out-of-the-way corners of the city, and which coöperates with institutions for social betterment, such as the Society for the Improvement of the Poor, social settlements, Juvenile Court, Newsboys' Home, and other similar institutions. This division has two distinct fields of work; one is in the homes of the children, the other is in the boys' club rooms. The home library work is peculiarly fitted to the needs of Pittsburgh. It reaches directly the homes of the working classes, foreigners, and sometimes criminals. It helps to Americanize that part of our foreign population whose filth and ignorance is our worst menace.

A home library consists of a small case of books placed in a child's home. At a stated time each week ten or twelve children of the neighborhood meet about the case and a visitor from the library gives out the books, and, in various ways, makes the "library hour" pass pleasantly with profit to the children. The method of spending the "library hour" depends on the sex and age of the children. The visitor's main idea is to introduce the children to books, but she cannot hold them by books alone. She reads aloud or tells stories, plays games with





